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Secretariat

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INFORMATION CIRCULAR

To: Members of the staff

From: The Assistant Secretary-General for General Services

Subject: COMPUTER VIRUS ALERT

1. There is a computer virus in worldwide circulation, which is timed to activate on 6 March 1992, the birthday of Michelangelo, the Renaissance painter and sculptor, and hence it is known as the Michelangelo virus. The virus represents a possible serious threat to computers in the Organization. All staff members should, therefore, be aware of the potential danger to personal computers (PCs) and should take steps to avoid a general infestation.

2. A virus is a special program, usually invisible to the PC user, which attaches itself to microcomputer programs and data. Having established itself in a PC, it then proceeds to damage programs, documents and data files. The virus may, for example, delete all files from the computer's hard disk. Alternatively, it may alter programs and data files in subtle ways, so that inaccuracies in data or documents result. Sometimes viruses will degrade system performance so that the PC becomes unresponsive. Occasionally, a virus may display unusual messages, or cause intermittent hardware malfunctions. In any event, the results of a virus are malicious and destructive to the PC.

3. Viruses are contracted by installing software which itself contains the virus. Although in the past viruses were not transmitted by copying data files and documents from one PC to another, more recent viruses have been developed that can be transmitted from diskettes that contain only data. Even software which at first appears to be properly wrapped and with a licence agreement that appears legitimate may be infected. If a diskette containing a virus is used on a PC, the user's system quickly becomes infected and loss of valuable data will ensue.

4. Because of the problems associated with viruses, the Office Automation Service recommends that the following guidelines be followed by each PC user:

(a) Know your software source. Install software only if it has been obtained from the Office Automation Service, or if it is in the original sealed package obtained from a reputable dealer. Do not install any software that arrives unsolicited in the post;

(b) Do not copy software from another PC. Your neighbour's PC may have already been infected with a virus. Likewise, the one you use at home may be infected. Apart from being dangerous, copying software is not allowed by the United Nations. You must be able to show proof that the software was obtained according to the terms and conditions of the licence agreement;

(c) Check all diskettes coming from field projects or other duty stations. People returning from missions with data diskettes or staff receiving diskettes from other sources (e.g., other duty stations or other organizations) in the pouch or by post should have these diskettes checked for viruses by the Office Automation Service staff. Come to room S-1917 with your diskettes or telephone the Office Automation Service hotline on extension 3-3157 to schedule this service;

(d) Never download any software from a bulletin board. This is one of the most common ways of infecting individual PCs. From there the infection spreads to entire workgroups as the bulletin board software is copied;

(e) Make frequent back-ups of documents and data files. No matter how careful you may be, a virus could become resident on your PC. If your critical files and documents are backed up regularly, you will be able to reload your programs and restore your data from your back-up diskettes so that the amount of downtime you suffer will be minimal;

(f) If you suspect that your PC is infected, contact the Office Automation Service hotline (ext. 3-3157) immediately. The Office Automation Service has viral detection programs that can be run to determine if your machine has been infected. If so, a certain amount of diagnostic work will need to be done to correct the problem. Do NOT attempt to repair the damage yourself.

5. Please feel free to contact the Office Automation Service if you have questions or comments concerning the above guidelines or about viruses in general.